

PERFORMANCE ART

Don't Look to Diamanda Galás for Comfort

By WILLIAM HARRIS

DIAMANDA GALÁS DEFIES SIMPLE categorization. She is a writer, composer and performer, yet the term performance artist fails to capture her rage or vocal skills. Musician is only slightly more accurate. True, Ms. Galás, 41, has released eight albums and is a classically trained pianist and opera singer known for her three-and-a-half-octave range. But what comes out of her mouth in performance is a visceral collage of notes, chants, shrieks, gurgles, hisses — you name it — often at extreme volumes, frequently distorted electronically and accompanied by a torrent of words. Ms. Galás typically shapes a libretto by mingling passages from the Bible with her own writings.

On Thursday at Alice Tully Hall, Ms. Galás will perform her new solo, "Insekta," for the opening of the Serious Fun festival at Lincoln Center. It will be repeated the next evening. In the fall, she will embark on a four-week tour of Europe, followed by a seven-city tour of the United States.

Two things about Ms. Galás are clear: She has a formidable stage presence, and by design her work is not soothing. The performer, who wears her jet black hair long and straight, parted in the middle, and on whose left-hand fingers are tattooed the words "We are all H.I.V.+", is a cultural activist. Her art is about — and tries to physically embody — the emotional and physical pain of people who have been marginalized by society, particularly those suffering from AIDS. Conceptually, her work is close to that of the late David Wojnarowicz, the visual artist-writer who died of AIDS in 1992. Theatrically, Ms. Galás conjures up the spirit of the classic Greek heroine Antigone — outspoken, passionate and defiant, both on stage and off.

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pers, clippings, scraps of information, research materials, file folders — her composition tools. Even the walls are covered with useful graffiti: ideas, phone numbers and scribbled fragments of texts.

Ms. Galás first began addressing AIDS issues in 1984, while living in San Francisco. At that time, she started composing a multi-segmented mass that would take years to complete. The 90-minute piece, "Plague Mass," was not presented in its entirety until 1990, at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in Manhattan. In one section, "There Are No More Tickets to the Funeral," a bare-chested Ms. Galás, covered in stage blood, equates the brutality of AIDS deaths with the pain of crucifixion.

Earlier portions of the work were seen here and abroad; in Italy, some reviewers called the work "blasphemous" and referred to Ms. Galás as "an evil singer." Yet Bernard Holland wrote in *The New York Times*: "Ms. Galás has learned to channel her frenzies into a narrow surge of energy, one that is difficult to sidestep, much less sneer at. Ms. Galás is a kind of terrorist. She sabotages old

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ways of making music, just as she is an unsettling presence in the cold war against AIDS."

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"I don't know anyone or anything quite like her," said Christopher Hunt, who presented Ms. Galás in 1985 at the acclaimed Pepsico Summerfare, where he was artistic director. "She is one of the few artists who makes the political content of her work valid and not just an excuse for a lot of histrionics. I find her compulsive listening, although not always something one immediately likes in any ordinary sense."

"Insekta," like Ms. Galás earlier pieces, is concerned with physical and spiritual suffering. It has been developed in collaboration with the sound designers Eric Liljestrand and Blaise Dupuy and the director Valeria Vasilevski at the Kitchen, the avant-garde performance space where she first presented her work to New York audiences back in 1982 and which last year produced her "Vena Cava," a well-received work about AIDS-related dementia and depression. Since mid-April, she has been the Kitchen's first artist-in-residence — meaning that she has had access to free rehearsal space and support facilities.

"My work is about individuals in extreme isolation and in response to a quarantine mentality," said Ms. Galás recently at her East Village apartment. "It is concerned with the destruction of the mind and issues of survival. The emotions I'm dealing with are ugly, and a lot of the feelings are not polite or therapeutic when voiced. The reason I have this tattoo is to reflect an anti-quarantine mentality. We are all H.I.V.-positive until the epidemic ends."

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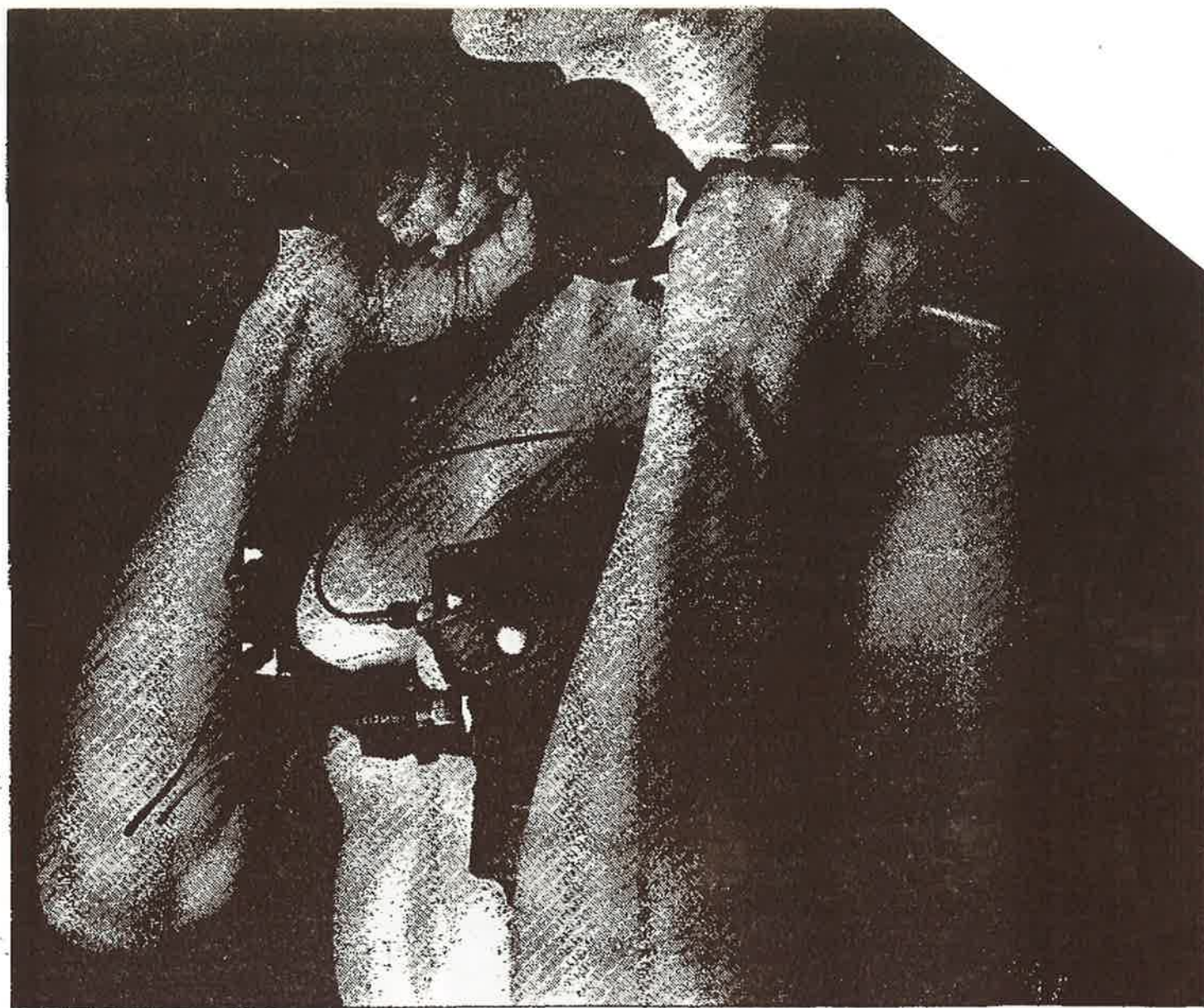
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ways of making music; just as she is an unsettling presence in the cold war against AIDS."

Ms. Galás defends "Plague Mass," explaining that it "is for and about persons who are fighting to stay alive in the face of indifference. I'm showing modern-day saints crucified by society. When I chant, "Were you a witness? On that holy day and on that bloody day, were you a witness?," I mean, did you protest the action of this crucifixion, this extermination, this execution, or did you just watch as a voyeur, an audience of cowards?"

Because of her AIDS activism — she was one of dozens of members of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (Act Up) arrested during a demonstration at St. Patrick's Cathedral four years ago — many people assume that Ms. Galás is either a lesbian or H.I.V.-positive herself. She is neither; but her brother, the playwright Philip-Dimitri Galás, died of AIDS in 1986. "A lot of straight men assume I do this work as a reaction to the death of my brother," Ms. Galás said. "They dismiss it as a hysterical female reaction. I find that attitude irritating, because it assumes I have no vision at all. It belittles grieving and implies that there is something intrinsically wrong with a woman who would respond to her brother's death from AIDS."

FOR "INSEKTA," MS. GALÁS HAS been researching biological defense experiments as well as the language of schizophrenics and the use of drugs like Thorazine and Mellaril to control behavior. "On the surface," she said, "the title refers to something that is small and insignificant. I'm also using it to refer to a faceless population, such as one that is found in mental institutions or in a prison, and therefore, a population that is available to experimentation.



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Ms. Galás, who moved to New York in 1990 after years of living on both the West Coast and in various European capitals, grew up in San Diego, the daughter of first-generation Greek immigrants. She began studying the

master's degree in music performance, she became fascinated with the jazz compositions of Ornette Coleman and John Coltrane. Jazz encouraged her to experiment with sound. Her interest in, and study of, voice followed.

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She had greeted a visitor with an apology, explaining that she wears tinted glasses indoors to protect her light-sensitive eyes, not as an intimidation tactic or fashion statement. Her one-bedroom apartment, like her art, is not tidy. Everything, including much of the floor, seems to be littered with newspa-

William Harris is a consulting editor to Dance Ink.

been researching biological defense experiments as well as the language of schizophrenics and the use of drugs like Thorazine and Mellaril to control behavior. "On the surface," she said, "the title refers to something that is small and insignificant. I'm also using it to refer to a faceless population, such as one that is found in mental institutions or in a prison, and therefore, a population that is available to experimentation."

"In the first section, or aria you might say, I tell the fragmented story of a person who had been raped with a knife. This person is trying to describe that treatment but is incapable of direct, linear speech. She discusses whoever attacked her by describing the smells she remembers. The image I'm work-

ing with is of being put in a powerless situation and also being part of a powerless population." The allusions in "Insekta" to the dehumanizing way many AIDS patients are treated, while not specific, are resonant.

Ms. Galás, who moved to New York in 1990 after years of living on both the West Coast and in various European capitals, grew up in San Diego, the daughter of first-generation Greek immigrants. She began studying the piano at age 5, and as a child, she was often asked to accompany the gospel choir her father led. At 14, she performed as a soloist with the San Diego Symphony, playing Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 1. While attending the University of California at San Diego, from which she holds both a bachelor's and

master's degree in music performance, she became fascinated with the jazz compositions of Ornette Coleman and John Coltrane. Jazz encouraged her to experiment with sound. Her interest in, and study of, voice followed.

Gospel remains an important component of her work, which is not surprising, since gospel inspires hope and was, historically, the music of resistance. Strains from traditional Greek dirges can also be heard in her work. Dirge singing transformed the act of mourning into an oath of vengeance. Ms. Galás cites Antonin Artaud and his writings on the "theater of cruelty" as another influence.

When composing, Ms. Galás does not rely

on musical notation. Instead, she describes in longhand the sounds she wants. In one section of "Insekta," for instance, her script calls for "sonically magnified, physiological body functions (intestinal, excretory, heart, salivary, mastication) ... a sense of a natural proximity to the human organism is desired."

Ultimately, it is Ms. Galás's voice that remains most indelible.

"My work," said Ms. Galás, "is not just a call to activism, although it has functioned that way. It is more than mere propaganda. For me, the definition of mediocre performance is preaching. I developed my voice so that I could sing what I heard, to explore the outer limits of the soul."

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- 3 MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING 12:30, 2:40, 4:50, 7:00, 9:10
- 4 JACQUOT 12:05, 2:20, 4:35, 7:00, 9:25
- 5 ORLANDO 12:10, 2:05, 4:10, 6:10, 8:20, 10:25
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